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LETTER DATED 22 OCTOBER 1998 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SUDAN TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

I have the honour to enclose herewith a report issued by the New Yorker magazine on 12 October 1998. The magazine gave full details of the shaky decision-making process involving the attack on the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant. The uncertainty and lack of assurance of the attack decision-takers went too far to the extent that the American administration kept the matter secret from the most senior Chiefs of Staff.

The magazine reported that the White House claimed it had convincing evidence to support the strike, but the experts are not convinced.

I should be grateful if you would circulate the present letter and its annex as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Elfatih ERWA
Permanent Representative

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Annex

ANNALS OF NATIONAL SECURITY

THE MISSILES OF AUGUST

The White House claimed it had "convincing evidence" to support the strikes against Osama bin Laden. But the experts aren't convinced.

BY SEYMOUR M. HERSH

BOBBY MAY, of Marianna, Arkansas, is a quintessential good old boy who served eighteen years as sheriff of Lee County, in the eastern corner of the state, and began a friendship with Bill Clinton twenty-five years ago, when Clinton ran an unsuccessful campaign for Congress. The friendship remained constant even in the worst of times; May attended a fund-raiser with the President in Little Rock in late July, at the height of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, and contributed ten thousand dollars to help Democratic Party candidates in Arkansas.

Now, as a businessman seeking oil and natural-gas investments in Africa, May happened to be in Khartoum the week that American Tomahawk cruise missiles destroyed the Al Shifa pharmaceutical plant, on August 20th. He was travelling with another Clinton acquaintance, H. H. Brookins, a bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, in Nashville, who had become interested in the question of religious freedom in Sudan.

The Sudanese plant, depicted by the President in a televised statement as a chemical-warfare facility, was one of two targets. Tomahawks were also fired at sites in Afghanistan suspected to be terrorist training camps under the control of Osama bin Laden, a Saudi extremist who had earlier issued a fatwa calling for attacks on American military and civilian targets. Bin Laden had summoned his associates to a meeting at the camps.

The Clinton Administration justified the missile attacks as retaliation for truck bombings thirteen days earlier that had destroyed the American Embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, killing twelve Americans and more than two hundred and fifty Africans. There was "convincing evidence," Clinton said, that bin Laden and his Islamic-fundamentalist associates had been involved in the embassy bombings and had plans to strike other American targets. The camps in Afghanistan and the plant in Sudan, which was associated with the bin Laden network, had to be destroyed, the President told the nation, because of the "threat they presented to our national security."

The announcement was all the more startling because, just three days earlier, Clinton had completed his grand-jury appearance in the Lewinsky matter. The missile raids reminded Americans of the power and importance of the American Presidency. Clinton concluded his televised announcement, delivered from Martha's Vineyard, where he was vacationing, by telling the nation that he was returning to Washington "to be briefed by my national-security team on the latest information." He spoke again that evening from the Oval Office, adding little new information, and once again depicting the training camps in Afghanistan and the Sudanese plant as an "imminent threat . . . to our national security." Sometime that afternoon, Samuel R. (Sandy) Berger, the President's national-security adviser, assured the White House press corps that the Administration had impeccable intelligence "with respect to the so-called pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum, which we know with great certainty produces essentially the penultimate chemical to manufacture VX nerve gas."

In those first hours after Clinton's announcement, Berger and other senior national-security officials who were involved in the decision to bomb—Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen, and General Henry Hugh Shelton, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—were obviously aware that the President's personal problems would raise questions about his motives for the Tomahawk strikes. During televised press briefings, all four officials emphasized the imminent danger of more terrorist attacks and the need for America to show resolve—arguments that decided the issue for most Americans, and most members of Congress.

Nevertheless, some reporters questioned whether the President had used military force to distract the nation's attention from the Lewinsky scandal. But Clinton's top advisers insisted that personal politics had nothing to do with the Tomahawk attacks. "The only motivation driving this action today was our absolute obligation to protect the American people from terrorist activities," Secretary Cohen declared at a Pentagon briefing. "That is the sole motivation. No other consideration has been involved."

"This is, unfortunately, the war of the future," Albright said. When Berger was asked about the nature of the chemical plant in Sudan, he responded with assurance, "Let me be very clear about this. . . . This was a plant that was producing chemical-warfare-related weapons, and we have physical evidence of that fact." The press was later told that a C.I.A. operative had obtained a soil sample outside the Al Shifa plant which con-

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tained Empta, a key ingredient in the production of the nerve gas.

Bobby May, watching much of this on CNN from his room in the Khartoum Hilton, felt sure that the President and his national-security adviser had somehow got it terribly wrong. He and Brookins had toured the Al Shifa plant a few days before it was bombed, and walked around, with no evident restrictions on their movement, as the plant's employees packaged and bottled medicines. May, of course, was no expert on chemical weapons, and he certainly could not prove a negative—that the facility had not produced them. Nevertheless, he was astonished as he watched the coverage of the national-security adviser's press conference. "I'm lying in bed and watching the White House talking about this place being a heavily guarded chemical factory," May told me recently. "I couldn't believe my ears. Until then, I had a lot of faith in our intelligence services. I couldn't figure it out.

"I spent a total of two months in Khartoum," on different trips, May went on. "One of the places where the Sudanese like to take you is the pharmaceutical plant. It was a showplace for them." Schoolchildren routinely toured the facility, he added.

Bishop Brookins, who has been the spiritual leader of the A.M.E. Church since the mid-seventies, had returned to Nashville the day before the bombing. Although Brookins, like May, had no technical expertise in chemical-warfare manufacturing processes, he felt that he had seen enough to be convinced, after learning of the bombing, that "somebody had made a mistake." Several weeks later, he and May separately got in touch with the White House in an effort to tell the President of their concerns about the bombing. May even brought it up with a Clinton official while attending a fund-raiser at the White House. No one in the Administration seemed to care.

ALMOST every aspect of the Administration's planning for the Tomahawk raids has been challenged, in more than a hundred interviews conducted over the past six weeks with past and present officials in the Defense Department, the Justice Department, the State Department, and the C.I.A. The men and women who make American foreign policy believe Osama bin Laden to be an extreme threat to American well-being. No one disputes that Sudan has systematically violated human rights, and permitted bin Laden and other terrorists to operate with impunity inside its borders, at least until 1996, when he and some hundred of his followers were expelled at the request of the United States and Saudi Arabia. Many certainly would have applauded his death if he had been slain, as was hoped. Nevertheless, there is a great degree of disquiet and dissatisfaction over the raids—and widespread concern over the President's possible motives for ordering them. There is also widespread belief that senior officials of the White House misrepresented and overdramatized evidence suggesting that the Tomahawk raids had prevented further terrorist attacks.

No American official would be quoted by name about the extent of disarray inside the government. But the lack of trust shown toward the Clinton White House by the military and intelligence communities goes well beyond the usual bureaucratic backbiting over a failed military action, and is far more corrosive. The Tomahawk missions are seen as very expensive failures: the nearly eighty missiles deployed, which cost roughly seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars apiece, did not kill bin Laden and his associates in Afghanistan, and the target in Sudan may not have been what the C.I.A. said it was. Those failures were a by-product of the secrecy that marked all of the White House's planning for the Tomahawk raids—a secrecy that prevented decision-makers from knowing everything they needed to know.

Most significantly, the four men who know more about the use of force than anyone in the White House—the three generals and one admiral on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who run the nation's armed forces—were not briefed about the use of Tomahawk missiles until the day before the raids. The only member of the Joint Chiefs to participate fully in the planning was the chairman, General Shelton, who was instructed not to brief the other chiefs or to involve senior officers of the Defense Intelligence Agency.

Another official kept out of the planning was Louis J. Freeh, the F.B.I. director, although his agency had played an active role in investigating the bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. No office inside the F.B.I. was asked to review the intelligence, assembled primarily by the C.I.A., which concluded that the Al Shifa plant was involved in the manu-

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facture of chemical-warfare materials.

The White House was urged by Janet Reno, the Attorney General, to delay the raids, in order to give the F.B.I. time to assemble more evidence linking bin Laden to the embassy bombings. Justice Department officials say they understood that Reno warned the White House that it was not clear, based on the information then available, that the United States had enough evidence against bin Laden to meet the standards of international law. The Attorney General is said to have had a second reservation: the Administration had not accumulated clear evidence of a link between bin Laden and the targets to be attacked.

Finally, there is known to be dismay within the Directorate of Intelligence and the Directorate of Science and Technology of the C.I.A. over what is seen as an unseemly rush to judgment on the involvement of the Al Shifa plant in chemical warfare—and the refusal of the agency publicly to acknowledge serious omissions in its analysis. Many C.I.A. analysts believe that there is evidence tying Al Shifa to chemical weapons at some point in the past—but not the evidence that was cited by the Administration. Some agency officials conveyed their discontent to George Tenet, the C.I.A. director, and his senior deputies.

UNDER current law, the President is not obligated to include the military-service chiefs in his decision-making—they are not officially in the chain of command. But their exclusion last August enraged many senior officers, because, as one former member of the Joint Chiefs told me, the military leadership was generally called upon to review plans and comment. "The President and his men never talked to the pros," another senior general, with firsthand information, told me. "If you have a selection process and your best and brightest get on top, use them." This general, who has run one of America's intelligence services, described Shelton as being "not happy" with the order not to discuss the Tomahawk raids with his fellow-members of the Joint Chiefs. "He was presented with a fait accompli," the general told me, and "obeyed his orders. And now he's catching it from both sides." The strictures on Shelton were so tight that he was unable to consult with terrorism experts in the Defense Intelligence Agency. One insider said that Shelton apologized later to the agency's distraught director, Lieutenant General

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Patrick M. Hughes, assuring him that he would "never let this happen again." (A spokesman for Shelton did not respond to a request for comment.) A four-star general depicted Shelton, a special-forces expert who was confirmed as chairman of the Joint Chiefs in September of 1997, as having far less influence on military issues with the President than his civilian advisers did.

One senior Pentagon officer told me that when the four service chiefs were finally "plugged into the operation," the day before the missile attacks, they managed to force one significant change: The initial target list, as presented to the President and Berger, called for Tomahawks to hit the Al Shifa plant and a storage facility, also in Khartoum, which the C.I.A. believed was linked to Osama bin Laden. At the storage facility, "unlike the pharmaceutical company," the Pentagon officer said, "there were no ground samples" pointing to the manufacture of chemical weapons. "We didn't know what the hell was in there. It could have been dangerous" for nearby residents—or, if the facility was full of nonmilitary materials, acutely embarrassing to the United States. "We told them, 'Take it off the list.'" The target was removed.

Ken Bacon, a spokesman for the Pentagon, did not dispute the assertion that none of the service chiefs had been involved in the initial planning for the retaliatory missile attack. Bacon instead provided the following statement: "The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff advises both the Secretary [of Defense] and the President. General Shelton played an active role throughout the planning and execution of this operation. As is appropriate for any sensitive military operation, planning was limited to those who needed to be involved."

Many men who served in the Pentagon believe that the service chiefs were excluded from the planning because the White House did not want to hear what they had to say. Since the early days of the Clinton Presidency, the White House and the Pentagon have disagreed on the use of expensive Tomahawks, which are capable of carrying nuclear warheads, to send a political message. The missiles appeal to civilian leaders because of their high accuracy and because no military troops are put at risk: the President can bomb a target with no fear that a shot-down American pilot will be put on public display in a foreign capital.

But there was more to the Pentagon's frustration than that. "The targeting data was weak," one intelligence adviser told me. "The coupling between the targets we were trying to hit and bin Laden's activities was very remote." Furthermore, said the adviser, who was informally briefed on the missions after they took place, Tomahawk missiles, which are armed with a small payload of high explosives, were unlikely to succeed in killing bin Laden and his cohorts in their well-fortified caves and bunkers in Afghanistan. "It's a schlock target," the adviser said.

The four-star general agreed, in a subsequent interview. "When you elect to use force in the Third World, you're judged not by a legal system but by a very sophisticated enemy that doesn't believe you anyway," the general said. "When the strong attack the weak, the weak win." He and his colleagues, the general added, would have argued against the use of Tomahawk missiles, because there's no evidence that such bombings have any significant impact on terrorists. "In today's world, we have very sophisticated adversaries, and to deal with them we have to understand their decision sequence. We have to understand how they make decisions, who influences them." International terrorists, the general told me, "are more sophisticated than our intelligence is capable of dealing with.

"If you do elect to attack them," the general added, it should be done, after careful analysis, at a point of leverage—"a collapse point. What means to an end do I use? Clearly, in some cases, something nonpublic and non-kinetic. Banking, for example. It's not something to do on a weekend in Martha's Vineyard."

In the aftermath of the truck bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, the general said, "and with a wounded President, there are large pressures on the system. So who's in the room? Clearly not the uniformed military." The general concluded, "This is classic Sandy Berger." The general's point was that he and other senior officers believe that Berger and Madeleine Albright are too quick to advocate force as a solution to diplomatic problems. "Madeleine is willing to fire a missile at anybody," the general added, with a laugh.

Some officials in the White House and the State Department, in conversations with me, dismissed the complaints as the usual griping of bureaucrats who were not included in the planning for the strikes. And one military officer who worked under Berger on the National Security Council defended him. "The demand for results in the Office of the Presidency are impossible," the officer said. "There is an expectation that the executive is on top of everything and has answers to all foreign-policy crises. There is no other accountable agency—certainly not Congress." The National Security Council must rely on "secrecy and dispatch," the officer said, to get things done.

"For the first time, the White House is treating terrorism as a national-security problem, and not as a law-enforcement problem," the officer added. "America has joined the battle. If there is group think" among the President's advisers, in terms of wanting the missile strike, "there also is group think on the opposition"—people in the Pentagon and State Department, who invariably find reasons to say no. "The answer is you have to trust our judgment," the officer said.

It is, however, precisely that issue—the White House's judgment—that has been so troublesome for the intelligence community and the armed forces.

One former top Pentagon official told me of a recent White House meeting with Berger and his aides to discuss a soon-to-be-released government report on a significant national-security issue. "All they wanted to know was how it was going to affect a [congressional] vote in three days," the former official said. "Nobody in that White House wants to hear bad news." The President, he added, doesn't have a national-security policy. "It's all ad hoc. All off the shelf. Decisions are random. Suddenly, this one time he has to move fast."

Many current and former officials noted that the President had refrained from a military response in 1996, when nineteen American airmen were slain in the bombing of the Khobar Towers barracks in Saudi Arabia. A review of the President's numerous public statements and speeches on terrorism and its implications reveals that Clinton has consistently stressed the need for improved law enforcement, urging in a radio address shortly after the Saudi bombing that more international effort be made to share information and prosecute suspected terrorists. One intelligence analyst told me, articulating a commonly held view, "Sometimes the hardest thing to say is that there's no way to respond which will not make things worse." But, the analyst added, "this President is in trouble with public opinion. He has to do something Presidential. To do nothing or to wait requires political strength—and a weakened President thinks he can't get away with it."

For this analyst and others, the bureaucratic anger focussed on Sandy Berger is misplaced. Berger is known throughout the government for his loyalty to the President and, until the Monica Lewinsky crisis erupted, in January, was widely expected to replace Erskine Bowles as White House chief of staff. If Berger was, as many in the government believe, rushing to judgment in order to hurl Tomahawk missiles, he was doing precisely what Bill Clinton wanted.

PRESIDENT CLINTON has had a troubled relationship with the F.B.I. and Louis Freeh, whom Clinton nominated as director in 1993. Relations between the White House and the bureau worsened over the summer, when a Republican senator made public sections of a letter from Freeh accusing Attorney General Reno of misreading the law by not seeking an independent counsel to investigate the Clinton reëlection campaign's fund-raising practices in 1996. Freeh and many of his top aides believe that the F.B.I. was excluded from White House deliberations on military retaliation because Clinton questions his political loyalty.

With the recent concern over terrorism, the F.B.I. has established new outposts and augmented old ones around the world. After the embassy bombings, Freeh flew to Africa to oversee the F.B.I.'s manhunt for the terrorists. By August 20th, more than four hundred F.B.I. agents were scattered throughout eastern Africa, beginning a process that would lead to several arrests. Senior F.B.I. officials have told me that Freeh and his top leadership were not consulted or given what they considered to be adequate advance notification of the missile attack, which could have brought reprisals—especially if bin Laden had been killed. One senior official also noted a suspicion, widely prevalent inside the bureau, that there was "no concern" in the White House for the director's personal

safety or that of his agents. Justified or not, and petty or not, such resentments have inflamed the working relation between the F.B.I. and the White House. To make matters worse, officials noted, in late September the President asked Congress to allocate only twenty-two million dollars to the F.B.I.—far less than the hundred and sixty-four million dollars that was sought—in emergency funding to help finance the embassy-bombings investigation. "Not very subtle," one F.B.I. official said, with a shrug.

A national-security official who was deeply involved in the White House planning for the missile attacks acknowledged that the exclusion of Freeh and his aides was no accident. "The F.B.I. has left a bad taste in other departments, because it leaks like a sieve," the official told me. If there are some senior F.B.I. officials who think the President and his deputies have turned against them because of perceived slights, the official added, so be it. "In a snake pit like Washington, even people in the F.B.I. can have paranoia," he said.

Nevertheless, barring the F.B.I. was counterproductive to President Clinton's oft-stated goal of stopping terrorism, for it added to the difficulties of the men in the field who were working—round the clock—to build a case against bin Laden. White House politics, if it was that, was interfering with a widely applauded national goal. "People here understand that there are decisions made above us," a senior F.B.I. official told me dryly. He also said that agent-to-agent coöperation in the field among the F.B.I., C.I.A., and military-intelligence services has never been better.

THE Administration's failure to give the F.B.I. enough time to protect its agents in the field contrasts sharply, some officials noted, with the White House decision before the bombing to evacuate diplomatic officers and their dependents serving at the American Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan. The evacuation, which was protested by some American diplomats—the school year was just getting under way—was reported by several newspapers; and this publicity, national-security officials acknowledge, no doubt tipped off bin Laden to the coming attack. On Tuesday, August 18th, the *Times* reported that Thomas W. Simons, Jr., the American Ambassador to Pakistan, had been asked at a meeting with Americans about "rumors" that the United States was about to launch an attack on bin Laden. He refused to comment.

"When bin Laden saw that happening, he flew the coop," one senior military officer told me. Some sixty Tomahawk missiles were fired at suspected bin Laden camps inside Afghanistan; they either were poorly targeted or did not all go where they were aimed. An informed official, who has directed one of America's intelligence services, confirmed previously published reports that two training camps controlled by the Pakistani intelligence service were inadvertently destroyed, with loss of life. "If you're going to do anything in Afghanistan, don't do it against the camps that belong to the Paks," the official added. His point was that the government of Pakistan, which is constantly under pressure from fundamentalist groups, has been far more coöperative than is publicly known in our effort against terrorists.

The elimination of bin Laden and his top leadership would have been a dramatic victory for the Administration in its newly proactive war on terrorism, but Administration officials, speaking on background, insist that that was not the goal. "We, of course, knew about a meeting" involving bin Laden, one State Department official told me. "We thought it would be delightful if we could hit a meeting"—and eliminate him. "We lowballed that possibility," the official added. "Our objective was to break up some structures and set the guy back." Political assassination is barred by a 1976 Executive order.

Both Clinton and Berger, in their public statements on August 20th, repeatedly cited what they said was hard evidence that bin Laden had been planning further terrorist attacks against America. "We knew before our attack that these groups already had planned further actions against us and others," Clinton said in his televised speech that evening. Berger, in a press briefing that evening, went further, declaring that the American intelligence community had "very specific information about very specific threats with respect to very specific targets. You will note that over the past week we have closed certain embassies, we have drawn other embassies down." Later in the briefing, he added, "Most of the intelligence people I have talked to in the last week have indicated that they have never seen anything quite like this, in the sense of the amount of information that mutually corroborated itself and pointed in this direction."

In interviews for this account, some American intelligence operatives, who have spent much of their careers reading and evaluating intercepted telephone calls and other communications, were taken aback that Berger had been so categorical. The specific warnings of future terrorism, one experienced intelligence operative told me, "came from garbled intercepts and a series of walk-ins"—defectors—"that, while not without merit, are no different from any number of walk-ins that come in all the time."

The operative added, "There are a lot of very wild things that get said"—especially in the Middle East. "They talk all the time, and there's a willful impulse to take the most extreme interpretation." One Middle East exile, who for years has worked closely with the C.I.A. in attempts to overthrow Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi leader, told me that he and other opposition groups constantly practiced *Funkspiele* (German for "radio games") in their satellite-telephone conversations—a practice most assuredly carried out by bin Laden, who worked with the C.I.A. in the nineteen-eighties during the insurrection against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. "You confuse the other side by sending false signals," the dissident said.

One factor in the President's and Berger's statements may have been Janet Reno. The White House and the Justice Department refused to comment on Reno's legal advice, as presented to the President on the eve of the bombings, but a White House spokesman reiterated that the President had legal authority to act. However, one Justice Department official, who had access to intelligence data, said that the Attorney General was understood to believe that the evidence tying bin Laden to the embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania did not meet what is known in the intelligence community as the Tripoli standard. In 1986, American warplanes bombed

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Libya's capital at night, including the residence of Muammar Qaddafi, after the National Security Agency intercepted communications that connected Libya to an explosion killing American soldiers at a discothèque in West Berlin.

The Clinton Administration had no such clear-cut intelligence, according to one senior member of Congress who attended a highly classified briefing by George Tenet, the C.I.A. director. "What he does is give you an awful lot of detail, largely about intercepts," the congressman said of Tenet. "No charts, no slides. It's a technique that people in the intelligence community often use—they try to inundate you with detail. And they'll draw conclusions that all of this is compelling and conclusive. A lot of it is in code. These people have code words they could use. I'm not sure how compelling all this is, although there's a lot of it. They came up with a lot of suspicious activity, but nothing conclusive."

Many Middle East experts with government experience also acknowledged that reports of bin Laden's wealth—he is said to have inherited three hundred million dollars or more—may have been vastly overstated. "Bin Laden probably inherited between ten million and twenty-five million dollars, not three hundred million," said James E. Akins, a retired diplomat who served as Ambassador to Saudi Arabia in the nineteen-seventies. "Maybe he's the Warren Buffett of the Arab world, but there's no evidence of that. Maybe God is his investment counsellor, but there's no evidence of that. Maybe somebody else is involved, but they"—people in the Clinton Administration—"don't want to think of that."

In the days after the missile attacks, the Sudanese government made headlines by producing evidence that the Al Shifa plant was involved in the processing and marketing of antibiotics and other beneficial drugs. The Sudanese maintained the initiative by subsequently demanding an independent United Nations investigation of the plant and its surroundings. The proposal, opposed by the White House, is endorsed by many Third World nations, and even former President Jimmy Carter called for an investigation, in a statement released on September 17th, which said, "If the evidence shows the Sudanese are guilty, they should be condemned both for lying and for contributing to terrorist activities. Otherwise, we should admit our error

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and make amends to those who have suffered loss or injury."

Berger responded the next day by firmly endorsing the C.I.A.'s analysis. "I have no less certainty about this," he told a press briefing. "For us not to have struck that plant, I think, would have been irresponsible. In fact, I have even more certainty about this than I did at the time that we struck it, based upon subsequent information." Berger and his colleagues on the National Security Council, facing skepticism about the validity of American intelligence, continued to insist that their assessment of the Al Shifa facility as a chemical-warfare plant was superb. "So I'm sure," Berger added sarcastically, of the Sudanese regime, "that they're deeply concerned about the penicillin that they may have lost in this plant."

On September 21st, the *Times* reported, in a dispatch written by Tim Weiner and James Risen, that the C.I.A. had been forced in early 1996 to withdraw more than a hundred intelligence reports on Sudan after concluding that its source was a fabricator. The *Times* also revealed that a few Administration officials had conceded, in interviews, that they "had no evidence directly linking" bin Laden to the Al Shifa plant at the time of the missile strike. "Nor are they certain whether their soil sample proves that Empta, the suspected precursor chemical for VX, was made at [Al Shifa] or just stored or shipped through there."

The soil-sample evidence was made public only after questions had been raised about the attack. The Administration, having backed down on its other contentions—that the plant was heavily guarded, that it had no apparent commercial products, and that it was directly financed by bin Laden—placed its entire burden of proof on what it said were laboratory results that could be explained only by the presence of Empta at Al Shifa.

The C.I.A.'s case, however, was weaker than even press reports indicated. Before talking to officials in the intelligence community, I had a series of conversations with a senior inspector in the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (O.P.C.W.), the agency in The Hague that is responsible for monitoring international compliance with the chemical-weapons treaty. The United States is one of more than a hundred nations that have ratified the treaty, which calls for the destruction of existing chemical weapons and a ban on the stockpiling and production of such weapons and their transfer to other nations.

The inspector, who had done laboratory work with Empta years earlier, pointed out that the chemical was unlikely to have been found, unaltered, in the ground, as the C.I.A. has told journalists, for the simple reason that it is highly reactive and, once in the earth, would react with other chemicals and begin to break down. "Is it possible?" the expert asked rhetorically. "Yes. Is it likely? No.

"If I'm going to drop a bomb on somebody," he added, "I'd like to be a little surer than they were."

The inspector, who under O.P.C.W. rules could not be identified by name, said that the organization's procedures for working with suspected chemical-weapons materials required that samples of the suspect material be divided, under carefully controlled conditions, and sent for analysis to at least three different laboratories. The C.I.A. was fortunate, the inspector added, because there are two highly reliable government laboratories in the United States with extensive experience in examining possible chemical-warfare materials: the Army's Edgewood Arsenal, in Maryland, and the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, in California.

Given Empta's reactive nature, the inspector said, the possibility of isolating it from a sample taken from the soil outside Al Shifa didn't seem credible. "No way it came out of a smokestack or in the effluent," he said. "The only way this material could be in the ground is if somebody had emptied a flask . . . and then taken a sample. That's credible."

The most stringent requirement in the chemical-weapons treaty, the inspector added, deals with the chain of custody of a suspected chemical-weapon sample: "We have to go to extraordinary lengths to make sure that the samples taken from the field are the same ones that arrive in our laboratories."

The C.I.A.'s standards for its analysis of the soil sample found in Sudan, as described to me in a series of background interviews with two senior American intelligence officials, fall far short of the standards espoused by the O.P.C.W. Al Shifa, the officials told me, had been identified in early 1997 by C.I.A. operatives inside Sudan as a plant engaged "in suspicious activities."

The agency began watching, and accumulating evidence that suggested that the plant was involved in chemical warfare. The most definitive piece of evidence was a sample of Empta dug up during the summer by one of the C.I.A.'s assets in Sudan, most likely a member of one of the opposition parties. "This wasn't the only soil sample we took," one of the officials said. "We sampled other places in Sudan, but it was the only place we hit"—where they found evidence of a chemical-warfare agent. The American, in attempting to explain why more soil samples were not taken, depicted the process of soil retrieval as highly risky, and added, "We had to deploy a human asset clandestinely. He had to be trained how to do it." (In an earlier interview, a high C.I.A. officer told me, "This is not like going in your back yard and digging around.")

The intelligence official had no first-hand knowledge of the sample's chain of custody between Sudan and the United States but said he was satisfied that appropriate care had been taken. "It was not done sloppily," he added. The soil sample was divided into three parts, and each was tested in the same private laboratory, the official said. The laboratory "found what we considered to be Empta in the soil.

"We think we have a good case," the American told me. "It's puzzle-solving: ultimately building a chain of evidence with links of inference in between." The C.I.A.'s job, he added, "is to put what you have on the table, and then someone else makes the decision."

The American officials appeared to be unfazed by the C.I.A.'s failure to learn before the missile raid that Al Shifa was actively packaging pharmaceuticals when it was destroyed. "We hadn't done a lot of research into what they produced, because we suspected in advance that there would be a cover story," one said. "We looked at open source material on Al Shifa—nothing there. You don't find Al Shifa listed in Dun & Bradstreet. People here really don't care whether they were making VX and aspirin, or just VX." (Senior officials acknowledged to reporters after the raid that intelligence officers had searched the Internet and found no advertisements or promotional materials for medicine on Al Shifa's Web

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site, and thus concluded that the plant was not in the pharmaceutical business.)

In his separate conversation with me, the high C.I.A. officer acknowledged that there were legitimate reasons to debate the merits of the agency's technical findings about the significance of the dirt outside the Al Shifa plant. But, the official added, "there's no second-guessing among anyone who is knowledgeable. Reasonable people can agree and disagree, but I can say with conviction that our part of it was well done and professionally done. You know, there's no such thing as one-hundred-per-cent certainty. There's a lot of shades—it's not black and white. At the end of the day, we don't make the decision. We say, 'Here's what we know.' Someone else—not us—makes the decision. I hope we were right," the official added. "But who knows?"

SANDY BERGER refused my requests to interview him, but David Leavy, the spokesman for the National Security Council, insisted that the Administration "had evidence showing that the plant was associated with the Sudanese military-industrial corporation. It's really frustrating for all of us," Leavy told me, referring to the widespread skepticism about the C.I.A.'s intelligence, "because the Sudanese government are bad people."

The United States still maintains diplomatic relations with the government in Khartoum, although the Embassy was closed in February of 1996, and its key personnel shifted to neighboring Kenya, after the intelligence community received a series of death threats. "That turned out to be a lot of hooey," one fully informed diplomat told me. The diplomat, who is currently involved with policy in Africa, said, "You mention the Sudan in the Department of State and people get very emotional—faces get red, teeth clench. You run into a departure of rationality, where the personal likes and dislikes seem to make foreign policy. Most of the professionals" in the State Department and elsewhere in the government, the diplomat added, "are appalled by what they see."

Berger, in a press briefing on September 18th, three days before the President's annual speech to the opening assembly of the United Nations, appeared to put the entire onus for Sudan's endemic wars and chronic famine on the regime in Khartoum. "This is a government that is one of the principal state sponsors of terrorism in the world, number one," Berger said. "Number two, there are somewhere between one point five million people starving in southern and western Sudan and we have plenty of food to get to those people, but . . . we can't get that food to those people, because the government will not let us have access to those people."

Berger's view is considered simplistic, even by many officials inside the government, and by other observers who also view the Sudan government with disdain. In a 1998 report, Human Rights Watch, an internationally funded group that monitors arms transfers and human-rights abuses around the world, described both the government in Khartoum and its opposition in the south as systematic violators of individual rights. The rebel forces, which receive substantial support from the Clinton Administration, have "also committed gross abuses . . . including indiscriminate attacks on civilians" and "the forced recruitment of underage boys."

The President's decision to attack Khartoum also has found little favor among the Sudanese opposition groups. Francis M. Deng, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who once served as Sudan's foreign minister, has bitterly suggested that the bombing of the pharmaceutical plant could be "a blessing in disguise" for the Sudanese government. The attack "is likely to arouse nationalist sentiments and bolster a regime that desperately needs national legitimization," Deng wrote in an essay for the Los Angeles *Times*.

The furor inside the United States government over the Tomahawk attacks has obscured a far more important issue: what, ultimately, should be done about international terrorism.

"I don't know anybody who believes we are in a position to take effective action against the terrorist threat," a former high-level State Department official explained. "What would I do? The first thing is go to our principal allies around the world and say, 'This is a growing threat against all of us, and we must do something collective.' Then you've got to move the Israeli-Palestine negotiations along. Get the Israelis more flexible," and deny the terrorist world "a rallying point." Finally, the former official told me, "You must spend a lot more on counterterrorism—helping city governments with crisis response." The Federal Emergency Management Agency "has got to become a major organization." The State Department veteran said he is sympathetic to the problems confronting Sandy Berger and Madeleine Albright. "Their President is preoccupied, and they don't know if he'll back them in any initiatives if there's political heat," he said. "Survival is his most important issue. It's always on his mind. If Clinton was not in all this trouble, he wouldn't have done it"—authorized the Tomahawk raids. "He's too smart." ♦